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Mississippi River fish being tested for PCBs

Minnesota, Wisconsin and several federal agencies are sampling fish and water in the Mississippi River to determine the levels of a cancer-causing chemical in the river and some of its tributaries.

The Interagency Task Force on PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) plans to have results from its first fish, water and sediment samples by Aug. 1. Some 14 different locations, 10 in Minnesota and four in Wisconsin, will be sampled.

PCBs are chemicals similar to the insecticide DDT. They are used in making plastic, paint and insulating material. If consumed in large quantities, PCBs are suspected of causing cancer in humans.

Several of the agencies on the task force, including the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (PCA) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have already sampled fish from Lake Pepin and found six to 14 parts per million of PCBs. The federal guideline in food is five parts per million.

According to Joel Schilling, head of the task force, the purpose of the new sampling is to get all agencies involved and to standardize their procedures. "In that way we can work much more rapidly," he said.

First samples of edible fish, including two panfish, two carp and two walleye from each of the 14 locations, will be tested for PCB concentrations by laboratories of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the FDA.

Schilling said the results of the first tests should give a preliminary view of where the PCB problems are.

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